1 Remarks on Evil, Suffering, and the Global Pandemic*

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The general problem of evil is a subject about which many books have been written for thousands of years and much of great depth has been said already. It also became very critical with the rise of modernism in the sense that a lot of people in the West and even in Western Christianity in general have left religion because they could not answer the question, "If God is good, why is there evil in the world which is created by Him?" Many variations of this question thus permeate both Western philosophy and Western literature, not to speak of Christian theology.

The Islamic perspective on the problem of evil is in general very different from what one finds in the mainstream in the West. You cannot find Muslims who turn against God because of the presence of evil in the world; and the few who do are Westernized Muslims who think that to be fully modernized and Westernized, one should also have the same "pains" in facing the world from which many Westerners suffer. Such Muslims do not turn to their own tradition's intellectual and spiritual resources to deal with this issue, such as the remarkable and also diversified discussions in the writings of al-Ghazālī, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, Ibn Sīnā, Ibn ʿArabī, and others. These authors always deal with the problem of evil on the basis of their complete acceptance that God is real and that He is good. Thus, their attempts to solve the problem of the existence of evil did not affect their belief in the reality of God. With these words in mind, allow me to now delve into this very contentious and difficult issue.

First of all, let us ask the question, "What is evil?" Let me point out that in the Islamic tradition, a common word for "evil" is the Arabic term *qubḥ*; the word that is opposed to it is *ḥusn* or "goodness." But these terms, moreover, also mean "ugliness" and "beauty," respectively. Thus, from the Islamic point of view, you could say that goodness is that which is beautiful and evil is that which is ugly.

The dualism of pre-Islamic Iranian religions such as Zoroastrianism, that is, dualism between good and evil as two independent realities, between Ahura Mazda and Ahriman, works perfectly well on the ethical and practical level, but not so on

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the metaphysical level, for there cannot be two Divine Principles. This explains why there have been certain metaphysicians and Sufis in the Islamic world who have gone so far as to say that there is no evil in the ontological sense. Rūmī, for example, speaks about this issue and defends it; but one must understand what he means. Since the Divine, the Absolute (*al-muṭlaq*), who is also the All-Good, is ultimately all that there is and there is no evil in It, evil as such does not exist. This is what Rūmī and others mean when they say there is no evil. In the Absolute, there is only the Absolute; there is nothing else. A famous Hadith tells us that "God was and there was nothing with Him" (*kāna Allāh wa-mā kāna maʿahu shayʾun*). And to this saying the Islamic metaphysicians add, "And it is now as it was" (*waʾl-ān kamā kān*).[1] So evil does not have the same ontological basis as does goodness. From the metaphysical point of view, there is therefore no equivalent ontological juxtaposition between good and evil.

Nevertheless, if there is no evil per se in the absolute sense, that does not negate the fact that evil is real on the level of relative existence, which is that of this world. Otherwise, the Quran would not affirm the reality of some form of evil on practically every other page, such as when it warns man not to perform evil acts. Evil is as real as the shadow under a tree beneath which a person sits in order to protect himself from the sun. This shadow does have an ontological reality, but it is essentially the absence of light. On the plane of the relative, evil is as real as we are as fallen human beings; but on the level of the Absolute, it is as unreal as we are.

Now, there is also this point to add about which the Sufis have always spoken, and which is the most important way to understand why there is evil. If we conceive of God as Light—after all He Himself says that He is the "Light of the heavens and the earth" (Q 24:35)[2]—and we conceive of Him as the Light of lights (*nūr al-anwār*), as we move away from It, the illumination of this Light becomes less and less, and darkness becomes more and more pervading until we get so far from the source of Light that there is only darkness. But darkness is not a substance, as is light. Darkness is simply the absence of light. Evil is seen in Islamic inner teachings in this way. Only God is Good, but He also creates. Creation implies separation—separation from the Source—and that separation means the gradual weakening of the Light of the Divine Sun. The crystallization of this separation is what we call "evil." To understand in depth this one principle is to understand everything about the root of the existence of evil in this world of separative existence.

Ultimately, evil is the result of separation from the good: Dante said so beautifully in the *Divine Comedy* that evil is separation from God. On the human plane, being the ordinary human beings that we are, we live in separation from God,

1 For an exposition of this saying, see ʿAyn al-Quḍāt, *The Essence of Reality: A Defense of Philosophical Sufism*, ed. and trans. Mohammed Rustom (New York: New York University Press, 2022), 111–113.

2 See the commentary upon this verse in Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Caner Dagli, Maria Dakake, Joseph Lumbard, and Mohammed Rustom (eds.), *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: HarperOne, 2015), 878–880.

which is why evil is as real as we are. If there were no separation from God, there would be no creation and no evil. Creation implies limitation—limitation because of separation from that which is Absolute and Infinite, hence limitless. From this separation there arises evil in various forms.

We must at the same time be careful not to trivialize evil, which is one of the great errors of modernism. It not only relativizes both good and evil in denying the Absolute as well as the relatively absolute, but often denies the ultimate significance of both by relating them simply to social norms and the like; that is, rather than denying evil on the level of the Absolute, this tendency in question seeks to deny it on the level of the relative. Yet denying evil on the level of relativity is like absolutizing the relative, which is of course the cardinal sin of modern atheism from a theological point of view and an error from the metaphysical point of view. I have in mind here those people who say that everything is relative, except of course their statement that everything is relative.

How remarkable it is that Islamic thought, even before modern times, was fully aware of the problem of relativizing the relative which derives its reality from the One who alone is Real, and also the problem of confusing the relative with the Absolute. This view is totally different from what some sages such as Frithjof Schuon have called, as just mentioned, the "relatively absolute," namely the manifestation of the Absolute in a relative way that retains something of that absoluteness in it. An example of this reality would be the Quran itself. There is something absolute about it as revelation coming from God, the Absolute. There are no other books that compare to it; yet the Quran is not the Absolute as such, but a reality that reflects the Divine Reality and the Will of God. Only God is the Absolute.

Allow me to come back to the question of beauty and ugliness, for it is not a superficial matter. One of the most remarkable features of traditional civilizations is the presence of so much beauty and so little ugliness. The stable in which Christ was born was much more beautiful than any one of these modern churches built on M street in Washington, DC; there is no doubt about it. That is why we go and visit those old sites which were simple, even stables where horses or animals were kept. This idea of the centrality of beauty was especially strong in Islam, where you have the famous Hadith, "God is beautiful, and He loves beauty."[3] So our whole attachment to God involves God's beauty and also love. If you love God, you must love what God loves, and thus you must love beauty. Islamic civilization was remarkably successful in creating things of beauty, from the carpets on which people sat to the minarets from which the call to prayer was made, and nearly all the objects, buildings, and surfaces in between.

From the Islamic point of view aesthetics and ethics are not separated from each other; although evil has to do with ethics, whereas ugliness has to do with aesthetics, the two are closely related. This is totally different from the view that

3 Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *Musnad,* in *Jamʿ jawāmiʿ al-aḥādīth wa'l-asānīd wa-maknaz al-ṣiḥāḥ wa'l-sunan wa'l-masānīd*, vol. 12 (Vaduz: Jamʿiyyat al-Maknaz al-Islāmī, 2000), # 386.

is now prevalent in many religious circles in the West and even to some extent in some parts of the Islamic world where Muslims have done a good job in matching Westerners in building ugly mosques, not to speak of other elements from interior design to everyday utensils. Traditionally, goodness was also associated with the beauty of the soul and evil with its ugliness. Even in English when one says, "I did something ugly" or "This was an ugly act," it refers to an evil act and not a good one.

A comment is also in order concerning our responsibility before evil. In Islam, we are always responsible for our actions. If something happens for which we are not responsible, we will not be judged by God for its consequences. The question of responsibility involves not only the act itself but also the conditions in which the act is performed. What is evil? It is what we know to be evil and nevertheless commit with our free will. If we had no free will, we could not commit evil. So the question of responsibility in relation to evil is very important, and this fact necessitates saying something about knowledge. Without knowledge, there cannot really be evil; we have to know what is good and bad before being responsible for our actions, which is why all sacred scriptures emphasize this point so much. We have to know what God wants of us. Without this knowledge, one would be innocent; ignorance is innocence in this sense. However, we are also required to try to not be ignorant, which takes us back to responsibility.

I now turn to the question of suffering. One might say that suffering comes ultimately from separation from God. When we were in Paradise, close to God, we did not suffer; suffering comes from separation from who we really are, from our *fiṭra* or primordial nature. We have fallen on earth and have fallen away from who we are really, but nevertheless we carry something of that reality within us. The whole of the religious life is based on us seeking to return to the real us, to how God created us. Suffering thus has to do with a loss of identity in a sense, more than anything else. That is the height of it. With it comes all other forms of suffering human beings experience: physical pain, psychological pain, economic suffering, wars, pestilence, etc. There is, however, a very important difference in the use and interpretation of this universal human experience in the religious life, and this reality is important to mention these days because, despite the prevalence of secularism for many Westerners, Christianity is still the dominant religion and Christian ethics and ideals are still prevalent even among secularists.

Christ suffered in a way that the Prophet of Islam did not. The Prophet also suffered, but Christ suffered on the cross. He suffered excruciating pain, and the image of Christ in the Christian mind—the cross being the sacred symbol of Christianity—is that of Christ suffering. Has one ever seen a picture of Christ laughing on the cross? The famous paintings of Velazquez, Michelangelo, or even Giotto are scenes of Christ's life where Christ is smiling. But on the cross He is suffering; He is in pain, sometimes with His head down. And so, suffering plays a special religious role in Christianity that it does not in Islam. Moreover, Buddhism shares this perspective to some extent with Christianity, paying specific attention to the fact that this world is characterized by suffering, although images of the Buddha himself are characterized by the state of bliss rather than pain. For Muslims, therefore,

suffering does not pose the same theological significance as it does for Christians, although it is considered to be a part of human life.

Some people suffer more, some less; some people know why they suffer, some do not; and so on. In any case, we must remember that ordinary human beings only know so much of the trajectory of their lives—they do not really know what came before and they do not know what is going to come after. We cannot judge our relationship with God and His Presence or the lack thereof in our lives only in relation to what we remember of the acts that we have performed or not performed, since this type of awareness concerns only a small part of the trajectory of our lives that extends to before our coming into this world and after our departing from it. When Muslims think of the Prophet, they think of all the difficulties he had, all the problems that he and his Companions faced. But they do not identify his life essentially with suffering. The Prophet came to bring knowledge of the One (*lā ilāh*^{a} *illā'Llāh*), as he said, "Say, 'There is no god but God,' and be saved."[4] That is it. That was his message. He came to the world to reveal that basic truth. Everything else in Islam comes from this one teaching concerning the reality of God and our relation to Him.

Spiritually speaking, suffering should always be an occasion for us to draw closer to God. The word *dard* in Persian, which can mean "pain" or "suffering," was often used by Sufis in a positive sense. There are many Sufi texts about this matter, and there is even a famous Sufi poet of India whose *takhalluṣ* or penname was Dard. Suffering should always have a spiritual element connected to it. We should accept pain and suffering as part of our destiny and should not rebel against Heaven because we suffer and question God by asking why if one is good do bad things happen to him or her, and the like. This type of attitude is prevalent in the modern world, but it is an error from the Islamic point of view. God knows best—He has created us. Suffering should bring us closer to Him.

This brings me to the final issue, namely the pandemic. The pandemic is a very concrete lesson about what I have already discussed. From the human point of view, yes the pandemic is evil. But from the point of view of the viruses that created the pandemic, it is not evil at all because it is the expansion of their kingdom. And I hate to say this, but with respect to the preservation of the natural environment, the pandemic has not been negative. Yes, we are sad that several million people have died. Yet we should also look at how much waste several million people can create over a period of two years. It is very tragic to say it, but we human beings are living in such a way that our very existence is a danger to the continuation of life on earth, and the pandemic should first and foremost be a reminder to us that we are not the lords of nature. Nature can play the same game, and little viruses that mean nothing to you can outwit you and rob you years of a healthy life, leaving even the best scientists unable to do something about them. In helping us to realize our limited power over nature, the experience of the pandemic

4 Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *Musnad,* # 16,871.

should also remove some of the hubris of the modern natural sciences which has percolated into the whole of modern society. It should bring about a sense of humility. This triumphalism which has been wed to modern science since before the time of Galileo in the early 17th century needs to be changed, as it is very dangerous for human life and the future of the earth.

With this humility should come an awareness of how precious life is, of how we usually take everything for granted. Three years ago, when we walked in the street we did not constantly think about viruses, wear masks, wash our hands, wipe down surfaces, etc. The suddenness of the pandemic alone should make us more humble and should make us realize that life is not to be taken for granted. It is one of the great sins of modern man that he takes existence itself and all the blessings that God has given to him for granted, thinking that it is his right to exist and have blessings, and always wanting more. He should rather ask himself these questions: "Did I create myself?" No. "Can I make my own liver?" No. "What did I do that makes me who I am?" Nothing. Yes, he eats to make his body grow; but even when he eats, he does not know how his body grows. The cells in his body that are absorbing the food, applying the oxygen, and so forth are not under his control; they are performing their own functions according to their nature. These observations are important to keep in mind in order to bring about within us an appreciation of the preciousness of life and along with it a sense of inwardness. You cannot have happiness by relying only on outward factors, as the outward world around you might crumble at any moment. We have to find our joy within ourselves. "The Kingdom of God is within you," Christ said, and the Prophet said, *qalb al-muʾmin ʿarsh al-Raḥmān*, "The heart of the faithful is the Throne of the All-Merciful."[5]

Finally, the experience of the pandemic should bring about in us greater *tawakkul*, greater reliance upon God and less reliance upon the absoluteness of human will and capability. This is not to say that we should not rely on the gifts which God has given to us, because the fact that we can do something itself comes from God. I use the Arabic term *tawakkul*, the idea of total reliance upon God, because it is so important in Islam. What is negative, what belongs to the shadows, namely the evils of the pandemic, can also bring about some good. There is nothing in life that happens from which one cannot draw a positive lesson, and happy are those whom God allows to do so.

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